TWO BASIC CLAIMS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

by Robert W. Burch

Philosophers in the English-speaking countries who are sympathetic to phenomenology have often eschewed bringing the analytic resources of the English philosophical world to bear upon the phenomenological and existential insights of continental European philosophers. In this paper I will take the first step toward clarifying two of phenomenology's central and basic claims, by rejecting certain interpretations as infeasible. I invite other philosophers to take the second step, which is to find clear and well-articulated interpretations of the basic claims that *are* feasible.

Phenomenologists of every camp hold two basic theses about their discipline. The first is that it is an absolutely presuppositionless science, and the second is that it provides a method for answering all possible philosophical questions. These are not modest claims, for together they imply that phenomenology contains the totality of absolute truth. They are claims which should be regarded with suspicion because there are good reasons for thinking that they could not possibly be true. Before going into these reasons, I want to make it clear that I have no intention of going into the question of what precisely phenomenology is. Does Husserl's anti-psychologism imply that phenomenology is a sort of highfalutin logical analysis? Or does Husserl's pro-Cartesianism imply that phenomenology is a brand of introspectionistic intuitionism? Phenomenologists themselves feud over such matters. But since all phenomenologists agree on the two basic theses mentioned, it seems possible to investigate these theses without thereby needing to enter into phenomenologists' internecine quarrels. Accordingly, I shall chop at the theses themselves and let sectarian chips fall where they may.

If phenomenology is an absolutely presuppositionless science, what does this phrase mean? One often-heard interpretation is that phenomenology bases everything on Cartesian-style incorrigible utterances of immediate intuition, and such utterances are not based on any evidence other than themselves. In this interpretation, however, there is a mistake: to equate being self-evident with being presuppositionless. Even if Cartesian-style incorrigible utterances are without evidence other than themselves, there is much about them that can

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sensibly be doubted. Hence, accepting them as the basis for an absolutely indubitable science presupposes a great deal. For example, Wittgenstein argued about such utterances—which he called *Äusserungen*—first, that they cannot constitute knowledge because they are incapable even of being true or false, and secondly, that contrary to appearances, they presuppose virtually the whole of language. Now, whether Wittgenstein is correct is not the issue. The issue is that Wittgenstein certainly raised cogent and plausible objections to *Äusserungen* being presuppositionless bases for knowledge. Therefore, to accept them straightforwardly as presuppositionless bases for absolute knowledge is itself a philosophical move with many presuppositions—for example, that Wittgenstein is wrong.

To find out, then, what can sensibly be meant by saying that phenomenology is an absolutely presuppositionless science, we must look more closely at the nature of presuppositions. The ordinary notion of "presupposition" has senses which do not seem to be relevant. For example, there is a causal sense: a healthy body presupposes a healthy diet. And there is a speaker-oriented sense: in telling you to do something because it is the Christian thing to do, the speaker is presupposing that you are favorable to the Christian viewpoint.

There are, however, other ordinary senses of "presupposition" which are more relevant to phenomenology's claims. They are senses in which one proposition logically presupposes another. For example, presuppositions of arguments are unexpressed premises that the arguments logically need in order to be valid. Presuppositions of statements and questions are propositions that must be true if the statements and questions are to have their usual force. "John likes horses because they are big" presupposes both that John likes horses and also that horses are big; if either of these is not true, then there is either nothing to be explained by the original statement—which is a purported explanation—or else there is no explanation given. The question "Have you stopped beating your wife?" presupposes that you have previously beaten her; if that is not so, then the question is a puzzling nullity.

The main difference between these ordinary senses of "presupposition" and the sense that phenomenologists employ seems to be merely that the phenomenologists' sense is concerned not with particular propositions, but rather with phenomenology as a whole: it is that which is supposed to be without presuppositions. We can make clearer what phenomenologists are getting at by comparing their science with other sciences. All other sciences take many things for granted; these are not questioned by the sciences, and indeed could not be. For example, history takes for granted that the earth has existed for a very long time. The question can be asked whether the earth did not begin five minutes ago, but historians never ask that question. Indeed, *qua* historians they could not, for the question is not a historical question. The reason it is not is that all historical judgments imply that the earth began more than five minutes ago; therefore, they cannot sensibly be used as evidence in impartially

answering the question. Another example: physics takes for granted that mathematics applies to the real world. It can be asked whether this is so, and why mathematical deductions made on pieces of paper should be replicated in reality. But physicists do not, and *qua* physicists cannot, ask these questions. For they are not physical questions. The reason, again, is that all physical judgments imply that mathematics does apply to the world, and therefore cannot be used as fair evidence in investigating whether this is so.

When phenomenologists lay claim to a presuppositionless science, then, what they are getting at is that phenomenology should have no presuppositions of the sort that history and physics do. Phenomenology should not depend on or in any way imply propositions that are outside the scope of its investigative powers. If anything is implied by phenomenology, phenomenology itself should be able to ascertain its truth. In this way nothing would be taken for granted by the discipline, and nothing would be outside its scope.

Let us pause at this point, however, in order to tidy up matters. For we have been speaking as if presuppositions were a kind of entailment, whereas this is not exactly so. In many cases in which P presupposes Q, P entails Q. But not always, as J. L. Austin points out (*How to Do Things with Words,* J. O. Urmson, ed. [Oxford University Press, 1965], pp. 47–52). For example, "The present king of France is bald" presupposes that there is a present king of France, but there is no entailment here because the law of transposition (If A entails B, then not-B entails not-A) does not work here: it is false that if there is not a present king of France, then the present king of France is not bald. Nevertheless, the statement " 'The present king of France is bald' is true" does, it seems, entail that there is a present king of France. At least the law of transposition does hold in this case. It seems that something similar works in all cases of logical presupposition. If P presupposes Q, then there always seems to be some proposition of the form " 'P' is V" which does entail Q, and in which V is some validity-notion, like "true," "valid," "meaningful," "in possession of its standard illocutionary force," etc.

It is not true, however, that if we have a proposition of the form " 'P' is V" which entails Q, then P presupposes Q. " 'P' is true" entails P, and yet P does not presuppose itself. It seems reasonable to hold, therefore, that the presuppositions of a given proposition P are propositions Q that are entailed by " 'P' is V" and that also satisfy certain other conditions C, among which is the condition of non-identity with P. It follows from this point that a claim that a given proposition P has no presuppositions is a claim either that no proposition of the form " 'P' is V" has any entailments, or else that any proposition Q entailed by any proposition of the form " 'P' is V" lacks the further characteristics C that would make it into a presupposition of P. The first alternative is absurd, so we must adhere to the second.

It would be reasonable, then, to think that a claim that some P is presuppositionless is a claim that entailments of " 'P' is V" lack the characteristics C that

would make them presuppositions of P. But, when phenomenologists claim that phenomenology is presuppositionless, they do not seem to have quite this sort of point in mind. What they seem to be attempting to say, rather, is that there is nothing on which phenomenology's validity, truth, meaningfulness, etc., depends that phenomenology does not fully take account of. The point, then, seems to be that anything one might want to call a presupposition of phenomenology is not outside phenomenology's scope; rather, it is establishable by phenomenology itself. To use now the terms employed above: phenomenology seems to be holding that if Q is any proposition entailed by any claim of the form " 'P' is V"—where P now represents all or part of phenomenology and V represents any validity-word—then Q is within phenomenology's scope and indeed is establishable by phenomenology itself. It is not that Q fails to possess the characteristics C, but rather that, whether it does or not, it falls within the scope of phenomenology.

Having thus clarified what it means for phenomenology to be presuppositionless, we are now in a position to see the trouble spots in the basic thesis that it actually *is* presuppositionless. For this thesis carries a certain implication that seems to be absurd. The implication is that any conceivable doubt about phenomenology's validity, truth, meaningfulness, etc., is already answered by phenomenology itself. Why does the thesis imply this? Because, after all, a doubt about phenomenology's validity, truth, meaningfulness, etc., is simply a question with a possible answer A which entails that phenomenology is not valid, true, meaningful, etc. Hence, applying the law of transposition, if phenomenology *is* valid, true, meaningful, etc., then *not*-A is entailed. But now the thesis that phenomenology is presuppositionless means that in this situation not-A is within phenomenology's scope and indeed is establishable by phenomenology. In other words, A is refutable by phenomenology. Hence, any conceivable doubt about phenomenology is answerable by phenomenology itself—to phenomenology's own advantage, of course.

This implication of the thesis that phenomenology is presuppositionless might seem at first to give comfort to phenomenologists, but really it should embarrass them. For it is inconceivable that any science should be able to answer all possible questions about its own validity. Doubts about a science X as a whole encompass any X-ist answers to them. Moreover, with regard to any science it seems possible to raise questions about its validity as a whole, and phenomenology is no exception. Hence, phenomenological answers to questions about the validity of phenomenology as a whole are no real answers at all. In a sense phenomenology can phenomenologically guarantee itself against all doubt, just as in a sense a liar can guarantee that he is not lying; but the value of the guarantee is no better in the one case than in the other. The fundamentalist argument, "God exists because the Bible says so, and what the Bible says is true because it is the Word of God," is equally self-guaranteeing, but it should convert no one to Christianity. Phenomenology can purport

in the same way to insulate itself from all possible doubt, but purporting is as far as it, or any other science, can get. It needs to be remarked here that it is no answer to the difficulty being raised to insist that phenomenology begins with self-evident, incorrigible propositions. For we can ask what makes them self-evident and incorrigible, and whether there can really be propositions of this sort. Answers to questions like these cannot be based on the very kind of proposition they bring under suspicion.

Phenomenology also claims that it is a method for finding the totality of philosophical truth in any subject, a method for answering all possible philosophical questions. I want to argue that there can be no such method in philosophy. When I say that philosophy can have no such method, I am not saying that there can be no way to do philosophy or that there can be no systematic way to go about it. After all, not every way of doing something—even if it is systematic—is a method. Nor do I want to deny that there are styles, trends, and traditions in philosophy, or that these may involve the application of certain methods. Certainly phenomenology is one style of doing philosophy, a style rather sharply marked out by its grammar and vocabulary, and possibly also by its procedures in tackling problems. But I conceive of a method as something akin to an algorithm or decision-procedure. If one has a method in this sense, then one has a set of rather easy-to-follow steps which, if they are correctly executed, inexorably lead to the result which the method aims at. In applying a method, there is no room for novel moves, for creative inventions, for intuitive leaps. One simply ticks off the steps in the order specified by the method until the desired result is reached.

Is this conception of a method a reasonable approximation to the way phenomenology conceives of itself as a method? Probably so. Phenomenologists regularly say that phenomenology is objective and invariant from person to person. They maintain that if two persons, no matter how different, correctly apply phenomenology to any problem, both will come up with the same answer. Only a method which is algorithmic could guarantee that any two persons applying it to any philosophical problem concerning any subject matter would always arrive at exactly the same answer.

A method of this algorithmic sort for solving all possible philosophical problems does not itself seem to be possible. One reason for this was foreshadowed in the discussion of the presuppositionlessness of phenomenology. That is, no science can be totally self-guaranteeing. To put this point in an idiom appropriate to methods rather than to propositions or doctrines: no method can establish its own applicability or correctness. The tests of any method must not depend solely on the method itself, for the tests would be viciously circular if they did. Methods are only as good as the results they yield and must be tested by these results. The correctness of the results, however, must then be tested by other criteria than whether they were reached by correctly applying the method. So, given any method, there is always at least one philosophical

problem that it cannot solve, namely the problem of the correctness of its own results. If phenomenology is a method, it must be tested and justified by procedures independent of it. The tests and justifications cannot, then, be solely further applications of phenomenology.

There are two other, closely related, difficulties with the claim that there are methods for solving all possible philosophical problems. They are difficulties originally raised, I think, by Hegel. First, many of philosophy's problems are created by the historical process. Secondly, many of philosophy's problems come from domains outside of philosophy proper. Many philosophical problems are full-blown intellectual torments before philosophy ever gets its hands on them. As Hegel puts it in a famous passage in the "Preface" to the *Philosophy of Right:* "When philosophy paints its gray in gray, a form of life has grown old. . . . The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk." Since this is so, philosophy must to a large extent wait on history and depend on other disciplines for its very grist. Philosophy cannot, then, at any given time in history even anticipate all possible philosophical problems, much less actually solve them, and no method can help philosophy to do this, even implicitly.

Let us look at two examples of how philosophy's problems can arise out of the historical process. It was history alone that gave rise to the vast power of the medieval Catholic Church and to the fact that it embraced many of the doctrines it did—for example, the Trinity and the Eucharistic miracle of the mass. But think how many philosophical problems owe their existence to this source. How very many arguments about causation, personhood, modality, identity, responsibility, and freedom, to name a few subjects, arose not out of philosophy's purest rays serene, but rather out of the messy turmoil of faith trying to formulate, clarify, systematize, and render consistent the obscure beliefs, tendencies, feelings, and urges that history thrust upon it. Another example: The revival in Europe of mathematical interest was historically, not philosophically, determined. But think how much of the peculiar logical structure of the Cartesian system depends on this revival. The admiration of deduction from ultimate, unquestioned geometrical axioms is surely the major cause of Descartes's desire to deduce all judgments from indubitable immediate deliverances of intellectual intuition. It is vain and idle to think that, armed with no matter what method, a Plato or an Aristotle could have deduced the medieval synthesis of Aquinas or the precise epistemology of Descartes. There are parallels, analogies, similarities, anticipations, even a few identities: but between the philosophical world of the classical Greeks and those of Aquinas and Descartes there remain wide gulfs, unbridgeable by pure intellectual reach and abstract methodology. They are gulfs created by the vicissitudes of history.

Now let us look at some examples of how philosophy's problems can arise outside of philosophy proper. (Of course, the two previous examples also illustrate this.) Typically, the construction of any theory leads to new, previ-

ously unforeseeable, philosophical problems. Newtonian theory leads to the spiritual emergency crystallized in the philosophical problem of Laplace's demon. Einsteinian theory leads to the philosophical problems of interpreting curved space, simultaneity, backward-running time, and time-travel. Freudian theory leads to the problems of unconscious mental activities and states. Karen Horney's theory of neurosis leads to the philosophical problem of the moral dimensions of mental health. Once more, it would be absurd to suppose that a Plato or an Aristotle, no matter what methods he possessed, could even have discerned the precise character of these problems, much less have solved them. For the theories that give rise to them, and all similar theories, are not logical deductions from obvious empirical facts: they are creative inventions of innovative genius. The data to which such theories respond are not, for the most part, facts with which ordinary men have long been familiar. They are data ascertainable only by special, sophisticated apparatus, or in special laboratory or therapeutic situations. Plato could not have observed a Doppler shift, nor Aristotle a transference neurosis.

To these latter two objections someone might reply that if phenomenology were a method that could predict all of history down to the last detail, and that could deduce the entire contents of all possible theories, then the objections would have no force. Indeed, this is correct. But would phenomenology want to commit itself to the belief that it can foresee the totality of history and discern the entire contents of all possible theories? This is very much to be doubted. And if we found some enthusiastic individual claiming that phenomenology had given him such amazing powers, I daresay we would not take him very seriously.

Now that two difficulties with phenomenology have been raised, it is time to observe, I hope with proper philosophical modesty, that they are no more than difficulties. In response to what has been argued, one might reply in a number of ways. Perhaps the notions of "presupposition" and "method" have been misconstrued. Perhaps no questions about the validity of phenomenology as a whole can really be raised, or perhaps any such questions presuppose the correctness of phenomenology. Perhaps specifically philosophical problems cannot have the origins suggested here. May phenomenologists, then, be urged by my arguments to clarify, to defend, and even to amplify their science. All philosophers should profit from their efforts.